

NATIONALISM, REVOLUTION, AND FANTASY IN EGYPT

Behind the Arms Deal with Czechoslovakia

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IN THE checkered history of the Egyptian nationalist revolution inaugurated by the army coup of July 23, 1952, the autumn of 1955 stands out as a time when the regime clarified some of its long-term aspirations. Until then the military Junta had given the appearance of functioning in a hand-to-mouth fashion. It had indeed got rid of the hated "British occupation" (at the cost of signing a treaty whose value is considered doubtful by the well informed), and it had intrigued, rather unsuccessfully, for preeminence in the Sudan. But long-range political and economic planning seemed to be conspicuously absent. This is no longer so; the period between September and December 1955 saw some significant developments which make up a distinctive pattern.

Internally, some not very important facets of conservatism have been attacked, as in a decree aimed at the jurisdiction of the Sharia (Islamic) courts. Externally, this action was characteristically matched by a reinforcement of pan-Islamic radio demagoguery to North and East Africa, thus leaving no doubt that the Junta intends to couple secu-

lar reformism at home with calculated exploitation of religious solidarity abroad.*

The arms deal with the USSR and Czechoslovakia—first publicly announced by Colonel Nasser in a stirring broadcast on September 27, in which he poured copious abuse upon the three Western powers—fell in the middle of this propaganda campaign, the apparent purpose of which was to project Egypt as a power intent on liberating North and East Africa (and perhaps West Africa too) from the shackles of foreign control. Although the campaign centered on the Sudan, where things had not been going too well from the Egyptian viewpoint, it picked up other topics as it rolled along, until there was scarcely a territory in Africa that did not appear to stand in need of liberation from some sort of peril. North Africa was specifically mentioned by Colonel Nasser in his September 27 broadcast as a source of conflict with France, "our Arab feelings" not permitting the Egyptian government to preserve an ignominious silence (as the price of French

THE dismay aroused in Western capitals by the announcement last fall of the Egyptian-Soviet arms deal has been succeeded by a mood of optimistic resignation—Nasser will after all not take Egypt behind the Iron Curtain. But are we continuing to underrate the freedom of commitment and maneuver possessed by an extremist nationalist movement under the leadership of ambitious army officers? GEORGE LICHTHEIM, who elucidates the complexities of Egypt's situation today, is a regular commentator on Middle Eastern subjects. He contributed "Soviet Expansion into the Middle East" to our issue of November 1955 and "Changing Alignments in the Middle East" in October.

*A Cairo radio broadcast to the Sudan on September 14 made play not only with the customary pan-Arab argument stressing the historic role of the Arabs in the Northern Sudan, but expressly underlined the importance of Islam in linking the two countries; it directed its diatribes against Western propagandists who—not content with harping on the record of Arab slave traders in Sudanese history—sought to weaken the religious link by trying "to keep the people ignorant of the greatness of Islam and the important role it has played in Africa." By contrast a broadcast in Swahili, beamed at East Africa on August 14, contented itself with describing the nefarious role of Europeans and Indians in Kenya, now faced with a rising tide of national feeling among "the people of mixed Arab-African or pure African origin." In broadcasting to British West Africa, on the other hand, the Islamic tune was well to the fore, Egypt being represented as the center of modern Islam, as well as the slayer of "imperialism."

arms deliveries, then suspended) while North African champions of liberty languished in prison; this particular scruple has since been overcome, French deliveries having been resumed and Cairo radio fulminations correspondingly losing some of their earlier shrillness. But British East Africa, particularly Kenya, also came in for its share of attention, and there were significant references to the parlous state of Nigeria, on the West African coast (thousands of miles from Egypt), where British rule since the 19th century had, it appeared, flourished on the ruins of some once famous Moslem emirates; so Cairo radio said, on August 17.*

The arms deal with the Soviet bloc and the concurrent propaganda blasts at Israel thus underscored a theme with which the Egyptian public had already been made familiar by months of strident campaigning against British and French influence. Since the Bandung conference last April, at which Egypt was represented by Nasser himself, this propagandist cold war against the West had been gathering strength, until some observers thought they could detect evidence of an informal arrangement allotting to Egypt the role of arch-foe of "imperialism" in Africa. Doubt centered on the question whether Cairo saw itself as the African counterpart of neutralist India or of—China! In this respect there probably were (and are) differences among the Junta; but it is at any rate noteworthy that the issue could be regarded as being genuinely in doubt in a sense in which India's neutrality never has been. That an Egyptian government which had just been offered (and had refused) membership in a Western-sponsored Middle East defense pact should appear to be wavering between neutralism *à la* Nehru and belligerent anti-Westernism *à la* Mao certainly disclosed something rather remarkable about the character of Egyptian nation-

alism, as did also the concurrent wave of blood-curdling threats against Israel. The latter could indeed be partly explained as a reaction against the Baghdad Pact alliance of the West with Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan—an arrangement painful to Egyptian self-esteem which appeared to call for a redoubled burst of pan-Arab fanaticism, to embarrass the hated Iraqi competitors. It was not so easy to account for the mounting wave of anti-Westernism—especially at a moment when the regime was about to launch on its biggest politico-economic operation to date: the construction of the High Dam at Aswan.

THE announcement of the High Dam project was another major development of the post-Bandung period in Egyptian politics. It dovetailed neatly into the Soviet government's current attempt to impress public opinion in Asia and Africa with offers of technical and economic aid, since it was launched to the accompaniment of hints that the Russians had offered to carry most of the estimated cost. But its chief significance was more narrowly political: the Junta thereby focused national attention upon a scheme which (unlike its megalomaniac propaganda campaigns in Africa and the Middle East) does have some relevance to Egypt's real problems. There is little doubt that Nasser and his colleagues are determined to build the High Dam, whatever the cost, and to get the money from any source willing and able to supply it. The expense being variously estimated at from 600 million to one billion dollars, it appeared at first sight unlikely that the USSR could seriously be thinking of undertaking the work (especially if repayment was to be made, as reported, over thirty years and mainly in the form of cotton deliveries); and indeed the first semi-official hints of Soviet participation had hardly leaked out than Western correspondents in Cairo were hurriedly assured that the government was unwilling to deepen the breach caused by the Czech arms' purchase, and would prefer the money to come from the World Bank.

*Cairo currently broadcasts in more African dialects than the BBC, and these emissions include programs specially aimed at Kenya, in which the Mau Mau savageries are extolled as a model of the tactics to be employed by Africans against the British.

Behind this apparent vacillation was the certain knowledge that Russian funds would come accompanied by Russian technicians, a development unwelcome to at least some members of the Junta. On the other hand, a World Bank loan—whether or not accompanied by direct U.S. grants—might involve guarantees of peaceful behavior on the part of Egypt—guarantees which the regime cannot and will not supply, largely because the Egyptian mob has now been conditioned to regard all such undertakings as evidence of servile bondage to the imperialist West. There is a genuine political dilemma here, quite apart from any financial and technical difficulties inevitably bound up with so huge an undertaking (building the world's largest dam in one of the world's poorest countries, with perhaps a billion dollars of borrowed money spent on irrigating two million acres of new land); quite apart, too, from the unsolved problem of sharing the stored Nile water with the Sudan—a territory recently “liberated from imperialism” whose inhabitants seem curiously reluctant to let Egypt get control of their economic destinies.

International experts are now busy investigating the project, but—and this is perhaps significant—Colonel Nasser is said to want a decision from the World Bank by next April, since he intends to start work on the site at low Nile next June, come hell or high water (almost literally). This suggests that the regime is not merely in earnest but also in a hurry. And indeed when one considers that Egypt's population is now increasing at something like a third of a million annually there is not much time to waste. In the five to seven years that must elapse before any benefit is derived from the dam, the population will have increased by something like two million, or about one-tenth; while by the time the project is completed and the associated land reclamation work finished, the expansion of the irrigated farm area will just have caught up with the increased number of mouths to feed. At the end of this period—currently estimated at about twenty years—the rural population would once more begin to outstrip farm production, but it is hoped

that by that time an industrial revolution will be in full swing with the help of cheap electric power generated by the High Dam.*

It is hardly surprising that this project has gripped the imagination of countless Egyptians for whom the “national revolution” so far has meant little beyond flag-waving, stirring speeches, and compulsory parades. Unlike Mussolini's much touted swamp-draining operations—so dear to tourists and propagandists during the 30's—it does have genuine import for the country's economy. That it should have come to be regarded as a matter of life and death for the present generation of Egyptians is, of course, another matter: Egypt is now paying for past sins of neglect. These also help to account for the explosive character of Egyptian nationalism.

SO FAR as Egyptian nationalism is concerned, the story of modern Egypt begins not in 1798, when the short-lived Napoleonic conquest upset the medieval pattern, but in 1882, when the British occupied the country and implanted a modern administration. Because this familiar theme is usually treated in purely political terms, there is a tendency to overlook that what modern Egyptians resent most about this period is the legacy of structural maladjustments it left behind. The matter has been succinctly put in the authoritative work on the subject, Charles Issawi's *Egypt at Mid-Century* (Oxford University Press, 1954), a scholarly study by the only contemporary Egyptian economist of note, and doubly important because written from a liberal and pro-Western standpoint:

It may be said that Egypt lost her opportunity in the second half of the nineteenth century. If

*The principle of the High Dam is that Egypt would store flood waters for several years, as against annual storage at present, so that the good years would cover the lean ones, making possible a more accurate calculation of irrigable land. The project would increase the cultivated area by about one-third, and bring the basin irrigation of Upper Egypt into line with the perennial irrigation of the lower regions of the Nile Valley. The inland sea formed by the dam will incidentally flood a 100-mile stretch of Sudanese territory, thus obliging Egypt to obtain Sudanese consent to the whole scheme.

during that time she had had a government which was both national and enlightened, and which could have laid the foundations of a modern educational system, carried out some measure of industrialization, and established the groundwork of a Westernized administration without incurring such a large foreign debt as to jeopardize the country's independence, her economic and social structure might have been very different from what it is today. It is even possible that a rise in the standard of living, and more widely diffused education, might have checked the population growth. Egypt might have emerged into the twentieth century as a small-scale Japan.

Leaving aside the question whether such a development was in fact possible, and whether an Egypt modeled on contemporary Japan might not have been an even bigger curse to its neighbors than the country now administered by a military regime of which Mr. Issawi thinks highly, it is undeniable that from a national viewpoint the British period cannot be called a success. The country is indeed not favored by nature (apart from the Nile). Ninety-seven per cent of it is desert, the cultivated area is too small to feed the swollen population, rural density is ten times the European average, and living standards are among the lowest in the world. It is also arguable that adverse natural conditions could not have been affected by different policies. (Ecologically, the Middle East is not, and never will be, a good grain-growing region, nor does irrigation really alter the situation, since the cost of growing grain on irrigated land is uneconomical). But the colonial regime, with its emphasis on cotton crops and its indifference to the needs of a rapidly growing population, certainly did not help Egypt to make the kind of adjustment of which Japan showed itself capable.

Perennial irrigation did indeed remove the danger of famine, increase the cultivated area, and make it possible to sow two or three crops annually (it had a bad effect, however, on the climate, and on the health of the rural inhabitants). But from about 1920 the advance of the cropped area failed to keep step with the growth of population, productivity rose too slowly, and output per

head began to fall. There was a decline in real incomes between 1920 and 1938, as pointed out by Doreen Warriner in *Land and Poverty in the Middle East* (Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1948), and from all the available evidence, matters have since then tended to get worse. The striking fact is that Egypt now has the most productive agriculture in the world (in terms of output per unit area) and the most wretched peasantry, with a tendency for real incomes to fall, though wheat, maize, and cotton yields per acre are among the highest recorded anywhere. The rural population surplus (which the towns cannot absorb for lack of industry) aggravates a situation which would be shocking even if the land were not as overcrowded as it is. Miss Warriner, in the volume just cited, gives this description:

Thus though it is fashionable to praise the Egyptian fellah for his industry and frugality, in fact the conditions of his life are an unrelieved horror. The fellaheen are physically wretched, and judging by the statistics of rural crime—the extraordinarily high murder rate—they are morally degenerate also; this is hardly surprising, since they are almost a slave population. Conditions are particularly bad in the provinces of Qena and Aswan, where the greater part of the land is in the hands of large companies. Here the rise in the cost of living during the war had tragic results. A malaria epidemic . . . caused the death of 100,000 in these provinces in 1941-3 as a result of their half-starved condition. Nahas Pasha, in a speech in the Egyptian Parliament in 1944, admitted that the cause of starvation in Aswan was poverty due to unequal distribution of land.

Since this was written, the "national revolution" has made a modest beginning with land reform, and a somewhat less modest attempt to convince the world that the problem has been substantially solved. From the propaganda material issued by the present Egyptian government, one might suppose that the face of the countryside had changed. In their soberer moments, the members of the Junta are more likely to stress that they are conducting a race against time, and that the High Dam must be built to take the worst pressure off the land. The emphasis

now tends to be on greater production, it having been discovered that there is not really much scope for land redistribution. At the same time the regime carries on wordy warfare against the big landowners, hitherto a favored class, since they were the mainstay of the British and the monarchy. Yet the Nasser government has also inherited some of their worst political traditions, notably the technique of converting social pressures into anti-foreign campaigns. The oligarchy in its day monopolized the fruits of British capital investment and engineering, and at the same time directed popular hatred against Britain and the West generally. The Junta would plainly like to repeat this maneuver on a bigger scale, with Israel as an additional scapegoat, and half of Africa as a potential field of expansion. When even a liberal economist like Mr. Issawi thinks that but for foreign intervention Egypt might have become a replica of Japan, it is not surprising that the ignorant military rulers in Cairo are persuaded that under their leadership the country can become a beacon for Africa and large tracts of Asia.

TO A large extent the unreal quality of Egyptian nationalist propaganda stems from the spurious character of the "revolution" itself. The land reform hoax is a case in point. In the first flush of enthusiasm, the new rulers announced that they were going to distribute about three to four million *feddan* (a *feddan* is 1.03 acres) of land among peasants and landless agricultural workers. Subsequently the figure went down to one million, then to three-quarters. On the first anniversary of the "revolution," Gamal Salem, the Junta member in charge of the reform project, declared that 500,000 *feddan* would be distributed among 150,000 families. Two years later, an official government handout had this to say: "The Government has already laid hands upon requisitioned land which amounts to 656,139 *feddan*, of which some 199,987 *feddan* belonged to the Mohamed Aly family alone. Thanks to this reform the standard of living

of one and one-quarter million fellaheen was raised as their income increased."

This double-talk conceals the fact that the great reform has boiled down to the registration of land belonging to the former king and his family, plus a modest proportion of the property held by some of the largest landowners. Early in 1954 it was reliably estimated that some 50,000 *feddan* had been distributed among a few thousand families in some two score villages, and the Commission for Agrarian Reform thought that a further 55,000 *feddan* might be parceled up in the course of the year. And this after so much fanfare, and after Nasser himself had proclaimed that for the first time in five thousand years "the fellah rules Egypt!" The 1955 government handbook makes fewer claims. It contents itself with remarking that "the Agrarian Reform has helped towards the standardization of the annual per capita income amongst all fellaheen," although immediately afterwards it adds the wild assertion that in consequence of land reform "the national income has increased by 30 per cent." If this were true it would be the biggest sensation in economic history. (The area affected by the land reform law, on the most generous computation, is about 10 per cent of the total cultivated land.) This nonsense is paralleled by some characteristic eyewash on the socio-political side:

On September 9th, 1952, a law was promulgated limiting landownership to 200 *feddan*, with a view to abolishing feudalism and redistributing the land justly. It permitted the big landowners to keep 50 *feddan* for each of their children, provided the number of *feddan* thus retained did not exceed 100 in all. The original proprietor, as stipulated by the law, should receive adequate compensation for his requisitioned land. This compensation is given in the form of State bonds redeemable in 30 years with an annual interest of three per cent.

The reference to "feudalism" is apparently meant to impress people in the West who are unaware that no such thing existed before the "revolution." The size of land-holdings is another matter. In 1940, according

to Miss Warriner, 12,232 large landowners held 2,168,514 *feddan* out of a total 5,841,011. These were the people who owned more than 50 *feddan*, and the majority of them have held on to the bulk of their holdings, notwithstanding the "revolution." On the other hand, there were some 150,000 medium-sized properties of between five and fifty *feddan*, almost two and a half million small holdings under five *feddan*, and an unstated but considerable number of landless laborers who owned nothing at all. Looked at another way, there were three million people out of four million "actively occupied in agriculture" who owned nothing, or less than one acre. Since two acres is regarded as the minimum capable of supporting a peasant family at a subsistence level, the picture can be imagined. So far the "revolution" has made no impact on the lot of the great majority. How can it? Short of taking every inch of land over two acres away from the larger landowners and distributing the total equally among the four million peasant families, there is no way of providing the average household with an adequate income. Since this is not to be thought of, the government now concentrates on schemes for increasing the crop area, leaving the social structure more or less as it is.

Against this background the growth of opposition movements is not difficult to understand. The dictatorship now depends for effective support on the officers' corps, that part of the urban middle class which still believes in its program, and the minority of medium-sized landowners who have been the chief beneficiaries of its policies. It has won the grudging acquiescence of part of the intelligentsia, but is unpopular among teachers, high school professors, and students, who resent the growing militarism, the absence of political liberties, and the clumsy police regimentation of intellectual life. It has to compete both with the Communists and the extreme right, represented by the demagogic Moslem Brotherhood and by a whole host of extremist splinter groups, not

to mention the old parliamentary parties. The regime is not even internally united. Some of its leading members, having graduated through various totalitarian schools, have now developed a considerable admiration for the Soviet Union, not unmixed with traces of their former fascist attitude. The intellectual level at which these various strands combine is well represented by effusions like the following over the Cairo radio on October 11, 1955:

U.S. democracy leaves the capitalist free to rule the country, while the masses chase dollars and watch baseball. The USSR is a true democracy, with rulers taken from the country through the Communist party.

This is the kind of thing that "left-wing" Nazis like Goebbels used to turn out in the 1920's, though the Egyptian product lacks the relative sophistication of the earlier German model. The odd thing is that the Junta can let this sort of talk go out over its official radio station, and yet maintain in all seriousness that it is buying only arms, not ideas, from the Soviet bloc. The fact is that its spokesmen are so conditioned to anti-Western talk (some of them were active Axis propagandists in the 30's and early 40's) that they are able to switch to the Communist line with a minimum of effort, and still persuade themselves that they are being true to their own tradition—and in a sense they are.

There has never been much of a secret about the checkered political career of the men now composing the military regime. Nasser himself at one stage adhered briefly to Ahmed Hussein's fascist Greenshirt organization—known before the war as the "Young Egypt" movement and subsequently dissolved for working with the Axis powers.

Among the more prominent of Nasser's colleagues one encounters both former Axis collaborators and present Soviet enthusiasts. Some of them even manage to be on both sides of the ideological fence simultaneously: Fathi Radwan, prominent in ministerial posts since the 1952 army coup, had been deputy leader of a fascist group, thereafter

represented Egypt at the 1951 Communist Peace Congress in Vienna, and a year later joined the Naguib-Nasser government in a prominent capacity, without ceasing to head a small but virulent extreme-right nationalist splinter group. His successor as "Minister of Popular Guidance," Salah Salem, combined extreme chauvinism with flattery of the Soviet bloc.

The Junta leaders themselves are so divided on tactics, and at the same time so alike in political makeup, that during the abortive military putsch of February 1954—ostensibly a movement to remove Nasser and give effective power to the "moderate" Naguib—it was possible for Nasser and his faction to claim, with every appearance of reasonableness, that their opponents included Communists as well as the "old guard." The Mohieddin brothers, both members of the Junta, who at that time joined the opposition, and even brought the tank corps out to overawe Nasser's faction, have since been described as Communist sympathizers—on what evidence is not known. What one does know is that on the occasion of the putsch, Nasser and Salah Salem, momentarily driven into a corner, drew public attention to Communist influence in the armored division, and complained loudly about "the unholy alliance between the CP and some of the other parties." This is the division which is now going to be armed with Soviet tanks and staffed with Czech technicians!

THE political mechanism which makes such confusions possible has now been described countless times. Nationalist leaders in backward countries experience what appear to be insurmountable difficulties in modernizing their countries democratically; they also experience resistance from the landed oligarchy, and cannot count on strong middle-class backing, there being no capitalist stratum in the Western sense. Instead they have to lean on officers, technicians, and bureaucrats who differ among themselves, mainly over the respective advantages of Stalinist or fascist forms of dicta-

torship. It is nonetheless surprising that the Junta has shown so little inclination to model itself on the Kemalist regime in Turkey, which in its day effected a genuine Westernization (now threatened in some respects by a revival of former attitudes). The "Kemalist" strain is not altogether absent in Egypt's present government, but it is far weaker than uncritical European and American admirers of the regime had supposed. Instead of its effected triumph, there has been a constant tug between chauvinist pan-Arab and crypto-Communist tendencies, with a growing emphasis on military and political expansion into surrounding territories.

At this point one enters the realm of fantasy which plays so great a role in nationalist movements:

Egypt was the first country in the world to have a regular army. When Mena, the first Pharaoh of Egypt, desired to unite Upper and Lower Egypt he organized the first regular army known to the world and in this manner achieved his end.

The army has suffered a great deal under the corruption of previous regimes, but in spite of these persecutions [*sic*] and the limitations imposed on it by British imperialism, it has preserved its glorious traditions. When matters came to a crisis the army was able to lead the fight for freedom and to emancipate the country with the Revolution of July 23, 1952.

The army has played its role in the past and will continue to play it successfully. The importance of the role played by the armed forces in the rebuilding of a nation need [*sic*] not be overemphasized. The political position of Egypt among world powers, its economic importance or its moral cohesion will be of no avail if they are not supported by an armed military force.

These trumpetings are taken from the official Egyptian government handbook, *The Egyptian Revolution 1952-1955*, published last summer to commemorate the armed uprising which put the Junta in power. On the face of it they are neither more nor less absurd than similar proclamations customarily issued by dictatorial regimes. They begin to look alarming only when read against the background of actual

Egyptian policies since the military coup. Egyptian nationalism, as a conscious political movement, begins with Arabi's rebellion in 1882, which was put down by the British and led to the country's loss of independence. Ever since then the army—i.e. for practical purposes the officers' corps—has been the focus of hopes which appeared to reach fulfillment when its leaders actually got rid of the hated dynasty, and then capped this triumph by forcing the British to relinquish their hold on the Suez base. Unfortunately the army's only campaign in modern times—the Palestine war of 1948—resulted in a humiliation which has not ceased to rankle. The current explanation that defeat was due to governmental incompetence and corruption is only half believed by the new rulers who came in on the wave of national resentment against the 1948 *débâcle*, but it has become part of the unofficial mythology, as has the claim that the British intervention of 1882 cut short a promising national development. There is thus a powerful incentive to military adventure at the first opportunity if an opponent can be found who does not look too dangerous; and Israel, with its tiny area and its population of less than two millions, is just about the right size—or seems to be. It is more than likely that this calculation will turn out to be unsound, no matter how many arms the Czechs pour into Egypt, but by then it will be too late.

THAT the actual arms deal last fall came as a surprise to the Western governments is no more to be believed than that they were seriously alarmed over the chance of Colonel Nasser's "going Communist." The position is more complex than that. Washington and London had known for months that a military deal was in the offing, and were inclined to be philosophical about it, partly because they underrated its effect on the political complexion of the Junta, in part perhaps also because they saw less rea-

son to worry about Egypt at a time when they had decided to build on Turkey and Iraq. Basically, it was and is the official view in the West that Nasser and his colleagues tend to some form of fascism, and that their temporary political maneuvers in the international field will have no effect on their determination to stamp on the Communist party. How far is this assessment correct?

That the majority of the Junta is anti-Communist may still be assumed, though this majority is perhaps not as large as was supposed until a few months ago. There is likewise no doubt that Nasser's own political ideas and those of his closest colleagues represent an amalgam of fascism and ordinary pan-Arab chauvinism. (Nasser himself admitted as much in an unpublished conversation with a responsible British correspondent, when he extolled the corporate state as a model for Egypt, and frankly accepted the term "fascist" as an adequate description of what he had in mind.) The mistake lies in thinking that this kind of orientation is a guarantee against policies which, from the long-range Communist viewpoint, would fit into the pattern of Soviet strategy. In a country like Egypt the distinction between the various brands of modern totalitarianism is often difficult to perceive. Nationalism shades off into fascism, which in turn sprouts semi-Stalinist tendencies. Some members of the Junta who are now rated as pro-Communist were extreme right-wingers in the past; one was an active Nazi sympathizer. All have in common with the Communists a violent phobia against the West and a readiness to believe that the Soviet bloc is likely to win the cold war (and perhaps the hot war too). And none of them are bothered by concern for democracy. To that extent they are thoroughly modern. It would be reassuring if one could say the same of the Western diplomats who have to deal with them.